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AUTHOR Gaffney, Patricia M.
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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study was conducted, guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the perceptions of parents mentored through community-initiated parent-to-parent exchanges? and (2) Does semi-formal support for parents through mentoring relationships with other parents mediate their early adolescents' risk-taking behavior, influence their early adolescents' student development, improve their families' well-being, and improve parents' personal well-being? Structured telephone interviews were conducted with two comparison groups participating in parent-to-parent exchanges at 19 geographically diverse North American sites. One group was comprised of the program directors and other administrators of a community-initiated program, Parent Share. The other group was comprised of the parents of early adolescents mentored through the program. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the support and strength available to parents of adolescents through mentoring, though useful to them in their role as parents, had much broader implications for their lives. Themes of isolation, hesitation, growth, responsibility, communication, transformation, sharing, and friendship emerged. These themes corresponded by pairs to four parent roles: needful parent; decisive, determined parent; empowered parent; and involved parent. These eight developmental themes defining four functional roles conceptualize the experience of mentored parents. The findings expand Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence model by conceptualizing the experiences of families, which can help schools develop more comprehensive programs of partnership. (Contains 17 references.) (EV)

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Abstract

MENTORING PARENTS: SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES OF EARLY ADOLESCENTS

Patricia M. Gaffney

In school-family-community partnerships involving early adolescents, the parent's voice is the least articulated and rarely informs school practice. This study examined whether parents mentored by other parents through a community-initiated program, Parent Share, perceived support in mediating their early adolescents' risk-taking behavior, influencing their early adolescents' student development, improving their families' well-being, and improving their own personal well-being.

A critical qualitative methodology using theoretical, exhaustive sampling guided data collection and analysis. Structured telephone interviews were conducted with two comparison groups participating in parent-to-parent exchanges at 19 geographically diverse North American sites. Using constant comparative method of analysis permitted concurrent collection and analysis of data.

Eight developmental themes defining four functional roles conceptualize the experience of the mentored parents. The respect and care of the mentors provide support and strength for families, promoting active care for early adolescents, mediating risk-taking behavior and influencing student development.

This substantive theory links the core concept of caring to the formal inquiry into school, family, and community partnerships. The results of the study expand Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence model, by conceptualizing the experiences

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of families. Awareness of the voices of parents can help schools develop more comprehensive programs of partnership.

MENTORING PARENTS:
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Introduction

The value of family involvement for adolescents is well documented. Their connections through personal relationships with adults influence their development as students and confer some protection from risk-taking behavior (Cornwell, Eggebeen, & Meschke, 1996; Resnick et al., 1997). Schools and community organizations have a stake in supporting the continued connections between adolescents and their families, and critical potential for mediating the disintegration of community which robs families of natural role models for parenting (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; 1995). Such support for parents is unlikely to occur spontaneously. Parent educators propose semiformal support for parents through mentoring relationships with other parents conducted through community organizations (Rich, 1993; Smith, 1995; Zetlin, Campbell, Lujan, & Lujan, 1994). Though postmodern schools acknowledge and support the permeable family's sentiment of shared parenting (Elkind, 1995), in partnerships involving families of adolescents, the parent's voice is the least articulated and rarely informs school practice. Family stories can reveal perspectives on wealth, social class, race,

and gender about which schools have not thought to inquire (Lightfoot, 1978), and contribute to the study of family processes and school achievement rarely examined beyond childhood (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987).

The 1983 education reports, including A Nation at Risk (Rosado & Aaron, 1991), renewed emphasis on involving parents. Parent involvement became the sixth correlate of Effective Schools (Ascher, 1987). The political strand of parent involvement through its attachment to federally-funded programs continues through preschool initiatives and Even Start, a transition-to-school program. Special and bilingual education, Title I and migrant programs also have parent connections. The extensive existence of policies and programs suggests that support for parents is unlikely to occur spontaneously. Programs providing preventive, proactive support for families experiencing the normal peaks and valleys of adolescence need to be more comprehensive, provide more opportunities for parents to receive support from other parents, and last longer (Small, 1990).

Rationale and Research Questions

This study examines how parent-to-parent exchanges support early adolescents and their families, and how semiformal support for parents through mentoring relationships with other parents is linked to the formal inquiry into school,

family, and community partnerships through Epstein's (1992) overlapping spheres of influence model and Epstein's (1995) corresponding framework of six types of involvement or caring. The following research questions guided the study:

What are the perceptions of parents mentored through community-initiated parent-to-parent exchanges?

Does semiformal support for parents through mentoring relationships with other parents mediate their early adolescents' risk-taking behavior, influence their early adolescents' student development, improve their families' well-being, and improve parents' personal well-being?

Data Sources and Research Methods

The data collection and analysis were guided by a critical qualitative methodology (Carspecken, 1996) with a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data were collected using theoretical, exhaustive sampling. Data were obtained through structured telephone interviews with two comparison groups involved in parent-to-parent exchanges at 19 geographically diverse North American sites. One group contained the program directors and other administrators of a community-initiated program, Parent Share. The other group contained the parents of early adolescents mentored through the program. Twenty-three interviews, 12

with administrators at 8 sites, and 11 with parents at 4 sites, were recorded and transcribed.

Semi-structured telephone interviews were also conducted through follow-up inquiries with the 19 program directors. The interview content was recorded by handwritten notes.

Data were analyzed using constant comparative method of analysis, allowing for concurrent collection and analysis of data. Through the analysis emerged categories, themes, and roles which contributed to a substantive core concept and to implications for the formal inquiry into school, family, and community partnerships.

The sources of the data for this study were 19 of the 26 pilot sites where community organizations agreed to initiate parent-to-parent exchanges using the Parent Share (Smith, 1995) curriculum. In examining the development of the programs at the sites, three categories emerged. The first is the *sites examined in depth*, describing 4 sites with 11 parents of early adolescents. These parents and their program directors completed recorded telephone interviews. The parent interviews were analyzed to elicit themes and roles. The second category is the *sites examined at length*, 4 sites whose directors also completed recorded telephone interviews, though the sites had no parents of early adolescents. The third category

is the *sites examined through oral interviews*, 11 sites with no parents of early adolescents whose directors nevertheless provided rich information on program implementation and maintenance.

Results

Reaching Families of Early Adolescents through Family-Community Partnerships

The evolution of the programs at the pilot sites showed diversity of interpretation in response to local needs and resources. In some cases, programs were aimed at families with children no older than age seven due to restrictions imposed by funding sources. At other sites, such families were the primary subscribers, though no upper restriction on the children's age was in place. Twelve of the 26 pilot sites planned family-community partnerships. The majority of the parents served by local versions of the Parent Share pilot have children younger than early adolescents. Monica, the only parent of an early adolescent at Site 5, a *site examined in depth*, reveals how programs may unintentionally miss those who can benefit from them.

> I had first heard of the Parent Share from an article in the newspaper, but I didn't think I'd be eligible for it since I have older children, too. One day I took my son to a well-child checkup and they had a little brochure about it

> and they…told me that I was eligible for it. So I called and I met with Alicia [program director] and she lined me up with my mentor now. And I meet with her once a week for a couple of hours, and I think it's great. I get a break from the kids, and the girl I'm hooked up with, she's raised four kids like I have, and so she sympathizes with a lot of problems I have now.

Monica's story also provides an extreme example of how parents pull away from schools during their children's early adolescence. She describes her decision to remove her 12-year-old daughter from the local middle school and home school her, along with her 8-year-old girl.

> …my oldest has a learning problem and she was having problems in school where they were pretty much refusing to teach her. They told me that she was at the highest she would be academically and she'd never get it, why should they bother? They just wanted to teach her basic skills. And she was being really stressed out, coming home crying, she couldn't handle the school work. I think it was more stress than anything, and I had tried talking with the school to work it out, and they weren't helping any, and so I took her out.

Alicia, the program director, saw benefits for Monica's family early in the course of the mentoring experience.

> …because she's home schooling, because she's a stay-at-home mom, she has a particularly high stress level…because she is also their teacher, the primary role model in their life, because she spends so much time with them as well as being the mom figure in the family to them. For them just to have her stress reduced any at all is a huge help for them…there's a lot less tension in the home…she has more patience to be able to explain things better…to stop and take more time in discipline…because she's not so quick to jump on everything they say or to respond negatively just because she's had a chance to be able to vent that with somebody else.

In a follow-up conversation four months later, Alicia provided additional background for understanding Monica's alienation from the school. Though an unpleasant experience with her oldest daughter's education triggered the decision to home school, the withdrawal was also a response to the tension of Monica's relative poverty amid the affluence of the lakeside community, where the local school serves well-dressed kids from old, established neighborhoods. The mentor mediated her partner's isolation by getting Monica out to church and community events with the children, connecting her to the strong home schooling network in the area, and encouraging her to bring the older children to the Boys/Girls Club.

Building School-Family-Community Partnerships

Seven sites [2, 9, 11, 12, 13, 19, 26] worked directly with schools, providing a rich opportunity for collaboration influenced by distinctive features of the communities and unique obstacles. Five of the pilot sites targeted a local elementary school as a partner institution. The expectation was that few parents of early adolescents would be found at the school-connected sites. The reality was much more diverse.

Among the sites forming school-family-community partnerships based on the Parent Share curriculum, Sites 11, 12, 13, and 19 provided working programs for study. Of these, only Site 12, targeting 5th and 6th graders, yielded parents of early adolescents to be included in the study. Programs at Sites 2 and 9 are on hold; those at Sites 11 and 19 targeted parents of younger children. The program at Site 26, for middle and high school students' families, is under development.

At Site 12, a *site examined in depth*, an Extension Service office, a community organization, and a local school district initiated a school-family-community partnership through the agencies' contact with one another at a regular meeting of a county human services coordinating body.

In a follow-up communication, Dolores, case manager at Site 12, where the primary mission was youth mentoring, wrote: "I was unaware that the parents have been able to notice a difference in their children's attitude and behavior." Her response to the analyses of the parent interviews illustrates the unanticipated benefits to families of early adolescents from "an infrastructure of support—from school and community to home" (Rich, 1993, p. 237).

At Site 9, a *site examined at length,* administrative changes in an elementary school on the aging side of town with limited resources, declining enrollment, and the possibility of closure derailed the implementation of the program. The program director, Tracy, reported:

> ...we have not actually enrolled any parents in it...we were just ready to bring on our mentor parents, [then] they had a change in the principal of the school...we only got to the point that we were working with a church in the neighborhood to gain some experienced parents to work with the other parents...targeting fathers of boys that were in fifth and sixth grade...about nine to eleven years old.

Later she reported that the initial contact person, a community resident assistant, left the school and was not replaced.

Site 26, a *site examined through oral interviews*, was a grant recipient charged with building community capacity to serve adolescents at risk, but impacting parents, too. The implementation team included school people, Extension Service employees, and new hires. The last were motivated to move fast. To bring the community along with them, the program director, Bob, planned to use less formal and more parent-initiated parent sharing groups, and electronic and print materials to supplement the Parent Share curriculum.

The three examples described here illustrate how schools can share partnerships with community organizations sponsoring parent-to-parent exchanges. True partnerships mean attention to the needs of all of the stakeholders. Building consensus is lengthy and messy, with few shortcuts. School-family-community partnerships require high maintenance, but yield high value to the participants. The promise of school-family-community partnerships involving families of adolescents is resources equitable to the support which has come to be offered to families of younger children.

Developmental Themes

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the support and strength available to parents of adolescents through mentoring, though useful to them in their

role as parents, had much broader implications for their lives. Themes of *isolation, hesitation, growth, responsibility, communication, transformation, sharing, and friendship* emerged to complete a mosaic of adults with many roles. The implication is that benefits accrue to early adolescents when their parents are supported and strengthened through mentoring.

The individual stories of the parents reveal eight themes which connect to the roles they express through their actions, and link the themes to the definition of the core concept of caring. The themes reflect a progression from *isolation* to self-awareness in the parents' perceptions and actions.

Isolation among the mentored parents was geographical, familial, job-related, health-related, and cultural. Lack of transportation and distance from extended family isolated the parents, as did both conflict with extended family and preferred reliance on kinship relationships over community resources. Employment both inside and outside the home caused time constraints which isolated parents from their early adolescents, and from their communities. Health problems with economic impacts were isolating. Attitudes originating in the culture or family of origin were barriers to reducing isolation. Getting out was a metaphor for moving beyond *isolation*.

The theme of *hesitation* suggests unworthiness, ambivalence, indecision, need, and powerlessness, all of which may present themselves as extreme independence by the parents or the early adolescents. Parents placed their children's needs and feelings before their own. They hesitated to acknowledge their own innate strengths. Economic disadvantage fueled *hesitation,* and decisive action was a catalyst for moving beyond it.

Parents acknowledged the concepts of *isolation* and *hesitation* through the role of the **Needful Parent**.

Growth refers to change in behavior, through strength found within oneself or through outside mediation. Reflection and openness are prerequisites to *growth*. Parents embraced role models for their own *growth*. They sought *growth* in their early adolescents, who improved their school achievement and attitudes, or gained new knowledge. Parents took initiative in improving family systems through management of time, stress, and school work. *Growth* could be a response to pain.

The prime *responsibility* of parents is for children and the finances which support them. Parents helped their early adolescents accept *responsibility* for home and school tasks; they contributed to the community through active participation in parent groups, volunteer work, and availability to children and adults as role models.

Parents acknowledged the concepts of *growth* and *responsibility* through the role of the **Decisive, Determined Parent.**

Communication affirms and reduces stress. It promotes listening, openness, acceptance, and getting along. Parents and their early adolescents learned how to manage anger, to express themselves, and to take initiative. *Communication* linked mentor and parent, parent and child, and ultimately, families to others in the community.

Key concepts of *transformation* are self-awareness, recognition by others, and the use of choice. Parents valued the opportunity to try new approaches with their early adolescents. They let go of how they had been raised, or how they had parented older children. Parents who were ready served as community volunteers. Some saw themselves as future parent mentors. Early adolescents of the mentored parents experienced *transformations* in attitude and school performance.

Parents acknowledged the concepts of *communication* and *transformation* through the role of the **Empowered Parent.**

Sharing is interactive, mutually satisfying, and often reciprocal. *Sharing* between parent and mentor grew from common experience and mutual goals for the match. The mentors were role models, and the parents accepted their

support. Often a child-centered concept, *sharing* bonded the mentor pairs. *Sharing* also extended beyond family issues, to produce caring for the community. *Sharing and friendship* strengthened the parent's roles of **Decisive, Determined Parent** and **Empowered Parent.**

Friendship suggests the reduction of *isolation*, the diminished need for semiformal social supports available through structured programs, and the development of mutuality in the match. Respect, access, trusting, talking, and visiting were the currency of friendship. *Friendship* permitted differences of opinion. It provided care and support.

Parents acknowledged the concepts of *sharing* and *friendship* through the role of the **Involved Parent.**

Functional Parent Roles

Four functional roles summarize the many performative roles the parents reveal through their words. The relationship between the parents' beliefs, realities and needs and the parental roles helps us understand what parents derived from the mentoring process. Pairs of themes each correspond to a role which helps to define how the parents perceived the themes and acted toward them. This correspondence is shown in Table 1 below. Though the correspondence between the themes and

roles as shown in the table is strong, it is not fixed. The theme of *communication* corresponds to all of the roles, as if it were a developmental catalyst.

Table 1

Developmental Themes and Functional Roles

Developmental Themes	Functional Roles
hesitation/isolation	**Needful Parent**
growth/responsibility	**Decisive, Determined Parent**
communication/transformation	**Empowered Parent**
sharing/friendship	**Involved Parent**

Returning to the research questions, issues related to the potential for early adolescents' risk-taking behavior were expressed through the **Needful Parent** role. The parents reported no risk-taking behavior on the part of their 10-to-14-year-olds, but future uncertainties were clearly stress-provoking.

Some issues concerning early adolescents' development as students were handled by parents through the role of **Decisive, Determined Parent**. There was

no change in uniformly good attendance after the mentoring began, perhaps reflecting the persistence of the parents. This role also regulated transportation and housing issues related to families' well-being, mediating financial hardship.

Early adolescents' school development issues of performance and conduct received attention through the parents' **Empowered Parent** role. About half the parents reported improvements in their children's school performance and conduct after the mentoring began, while the other half reported maintenance of their children's good grades and conduct. Issues of families' well-being resolved by improved communication were also handled through this role. Parents reported improving their personal communication skills after the mentoring began, using the **Empowered Parent** role for matters of personal well-being. These issues were also addressed through the role of **Involved Parent**, when the parents' well-being extended itself to reciprocity with the mentor.

Conclusion

The eight developmental themes defining four functional roles conceptualize the experience of the mentored parents. The respect and care of the mentors provide support and strength for families, promoting active care for early adolescents, mediating risk-taking behavior and influencing student development.

This substantive theory links the core concept of caring to the formal inquiry into school, family, and community partnerships through Epstein's (1992) overlapping spheres of influence model.

The results of the study expand Epstein's (1992) model, by conceptualizing the experience of families. Awareness of the voices of parents can help schools and community organizations develop more comprehensive programs of school-family-community partnership, powerfully joining the forces of the spheres of influence model.

The voice of Laura, case manager at Site 1, provided profound insights throughout the study. It is appropriate to close with her view of how parent-to-parent mentoring can support families of early adolescents.

> …I've been doing this kind of work for a long time now and one of the issues …I used to have as a caseworker, I would come back to the office after interviewing kids to get a [mentor], and I'd say, "You know, that mom needs a [mentor]. If we could just get someone in there to also help Mom, she wouldn't be so tired, she wouldn't be so down on herself, and maybe her confidence would be a little better." And so…to actually do some of this

matching and see the difference it's made. I wholeheartedly believe that this program is 100 percent beneficial.

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